



Colour Consciousness and Internalized Racism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine colour consciousness, the devastating impacts of racism, and how systemic prejudice destroys the lives of Black people in Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Toni Morrison portrays the ceaseless struggle of African Americans to survive in the White dominated society. She posits that Black people are treated as aliens who are in a lifelong battle for survival from birth to death. This research asserts that while the Black community strives to build an ideal ego, White society consistently acts as a barrier to its development. The study argues that White society functions as a distorted mirror for the Black people reflecting only their perceived ugliness and otherness. This confrontation between the Black individuals' ideal ego and the reality imposed by White society is responsible for their tragic lives and psychological fragmentation. Adopting a qualitative methodology and thematic analysis, this research explores the sufferings and self-destruction of the African Americans who are seen as incongruous in a world full of perfectness. The findings uncover that skin colour cannot define personal identity, and the Black people's struggle for recognition is based on a misconception perpetuated by the racially charged atmosphere. The study reveals that colour consciousness functions as a devastating force that deforms self-perception, rifts familial bonds and aggravates socio-economic intolerance. Ultimately, this study contributes to exposing the harsh truth of colour consciousness, which directly or indirectly creates an invisible wall between human beings by subverting their conscience.

1. Introduction

Can the skin colour determine the existence of a person? The obvious answer is no but the colour consciousness of both the Black and White people determines the existence of Black people. Colour consciousness, a lethal kind of awareness based on skin colour, shapes the lives and opportunities of human beings and even their identities as human beings are sometimes controlled by it. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison upholds the toxic reality that people are judged and treated on the basis of their skin colour which is only an outward feature of human beings. Black people are inferior and worthless only because they are black in colour and even their social status is inextricably linked to their blackness. The African Americans are presented as the proletariat class as if it is a rule of nature and nothing can go against it. Different kinds of standards including beauty standard, social and cultural ideals that determine the physical attractiveness like skin-colour, hair, body structure, alter the lives and meaning of existence for

the Black people because they forget the essence of their existence by involving themselves in the race to get the white mask. The White ideology (an ideology which equates white with beauty and black with ugliness) makes the Black people find themselves ugly and outcast. Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, is the primary victim of colourism as she is told by those around her that she is ugly, and this becomes imprinted in her mind which ultimately forces her to have blue eyes to hide her perceived ugliness and to receive recognition from the White society. Colour consciousness corrupts everything it touches. The destructive nature of colour consciousness can even extinguish maternal affection. Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's biological mother, is also a victim of this colour consciousness which coaxes her to imitate the White cultural ideals to attain self-worth but her vain mimicry only destroys her motherhood as she never emotionally accepts her daughter, Pecola, solely because of her black skin. She forgets that a crow will breed a crow, not a peacock (Biju, 2018). Rather than relying on each other for support, Pauline perceives the "blackness" in her child, while Pecola views Pauline as a stranger, addressing her as "Mrs. Breedlove" instead of "Mother." (Mahaffey, 2004, p. 161). What could be a more detrimental consequence of color consciousness than the alteration of the mother-daughter relationship, a bond foundational to the child's psychological survival. This research is going to present the visible outcomes of colour consciousness like discrimination, humiliation, complexities which make the lives of the Black people unbearably miserable while keeping the lives of White individuals comfortable. Actually, this article critiques that in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, colour consciousness acts as a poisonous drive which directly or indirectly breeds distinctions in societal and economic structures of a society, corrupts the educational system, the most enlightening part of a society by offering privileges only to the White students, destroys familial bonds by reversing the mother-daughter relationship, develop a sense of low self-esteem and self-loathing among the Black people that ultimately prevents them from discovering their true identity. To unpack these dynamics, the study is organized around two research questions. First, how does Toni Morrison use Pauline Breedlove and Pecola to illustrate the internalization of white beauty standards? Second, in what ways does Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* portray the instances of colour consciousness? This article actually depicts an anti-utopian world where two different classes of people exist but both are trapped by a common self-perceived factor that is colour consciousness.

2. Literature Review

It is a known fact that human skin colour varies due to different regional features and Melanin concentrations in the body. But unfortunately, the White people, who consider themselves as the most civilized nation, creates discrimination between people on the basis of a silly thing that is skin colour. They highlighted the prominence of visual indicators of difference as expressed through skin color (Ashcroft et al., 2007). White people always find their fair skin colour as a thing of pride and use this to make the Black people feel unfit in their so-called perfect world. The white standard compels the Black people to run after a white mask to hide their imposed ugliness and in return they only ruin their dignity and happiness. The internalization of the White beauty ideal has led to dissatisfaction and shame among non-white people (Wylene, 2021, p. 1). It is not like that the African American Black people didn't adopt the lifestyle of White Americans but by ignoring their efforts the Whites always try to prove them (the Blacks) as savages. Similarly European travelers of the early modern era labeled Africans as 'savages' and used skin colour as a primary marker of difference. They also observed the physical characteristics and lifestyles of the different groups (Camp, 2015). The Black people not only approve the beauty standard created by the White community but actually absorb and internalize it and that's why they easily accept their imposed ugliness. The novel, *The Bluest Eye* brutally criticizes the fact that internalization of beauty standard, which promotes white skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair as the tags of so-called beauty, leads the Black people to self-loathing and psychological disorder (Pegu, 2020). Colour consciousness not even spares the Black children as it destroys the innocence of Black children and makes them

suffer from mental trauma as they see themselves through the lens of racism (Rosenberg, 1987). Cultural and communal traditions shape the quest for identity (Bryce, 1992). Furthermore, African Americans do not get any opportunity to change their financial status. The White society associates poverty with the Black people as if the black skin goes with poverty and white skin goes with richness and nothing can change it. “You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (Fanon, 1990, p. 30). Especially colour consciousness brutally shakes the self-reliance, self-esteem and dignity of Black female beings. Pauline, in *The Bluest Eye*, is addicted of having a White image and then she consciously or unconsciously passes it on to her daughter who also dreams of being recognized by having the blue eyes, a symbol of White beauty standards. The insidious nature of colorism is exacerbated by the transmission of prejudice from one generation to the next (Turner, 2013, p. 43). Black people are forcibly involved in an unending struggle to make a place for themselves in White society (Dar et al., 2018). There is an intrinsic connection between capitalism and racist behaviour; indeed, capitalism fuels colour awareness. Capitalism works through its tools of representation like advertisements, fashion models and kid's toys, producing a desire among African Americans to emulate the White figures in these media—the epitome of White beauty standards—and to possess toys that are exclusively white in colour (Khan & Rahman, 2014). Some studies aim to examine the ethnic feminist awareness in Toni Morrison's novels within the context of Black feminist ideologies. Morrison's works frequently reflect on the historical injustices endured by African American women and adeptly depict such trauma by exploring their tumultuous existence (Venkatesan, 2011). The scholarly works reviewed in this study of are directly relevant to the present research and contribute to the evaluation of this topic. Several scholars examine racism, its psychological effects, and the role of racial identity, while others analyze the internal conflicts experienced by the novel's characters. But none of this focuses on exactly the consciousness or internal feeling that makes the Whites get involved in inhuman discrimination and do injustice to the Black people. And the same colour consciousness makes the Black people to do injustice to themselves as they fail to see their own self-worth. This study works on this gap and presents the reason (color consciousness) for the discriminatory consequences.

3. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative, text-centric methodology. Qualitative research typically engages with diverse forms of data particularly empirical data as it involves observations, case studies, interviews, narratives, visual, interactive, contextual texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). A key strength of qualitative research is that it can analyze the human behaviors, feelings, experiences that are very difficult to express through numerical data, the weapon of quantitative research method (Foley & Timonen, 2015). Qualitative research focuses on narrative and is not dependent on numbers or statistics rather it depends on words. In this paradigm, words serve as a primary analytical tool, allowing qualitative method to investigate complex, real-world problems (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). A quantitative approach cannot properly capture the nuanced and lived trauma of colour consciousness. This paper explores colour consciousness, White beauty standards and White supremacist ideology and examines the injustices that have resulted from it, through Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The researchers collected data and information from various sources such as internet resources, library works, opinions of critics, and peer-reviewed journal articles related to this issue. It employs thematic analysis to unveil the true nature of colour consciousness and its negative impacts on human mind that ultimately determine their actions. The analysis primarily focuses on the vivid descriptions of the characters, such as of Pecola and Pauline to reveal the socio-economic exploitations, educational discrimination and psychoanalytic self-aborrence. This study analyses and combines concrete evidences from related chapters to prove its thematic arguments. Systematically analyzing the characters and their activities, it unveils the psychological mechanics of internalized racism as presented in *The Bluest Eye*. Ultimately, this methodology

perfectly aligns with the study's objectives, and it would be impossible to achieve them through alternative methodologies.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The Socio-Economic Exploitation

Black Americans, seen as second-class citizens in the United States, are the largest ethnic minority in the country. The ancestry of African Americans is traced to Africa. In the 16th century, the slave trade was prevalent, and many Africans were forcibly transported to Latin America as slaves. The arrival of Black Africans in America began with slavery, which persisted until the end of their lives. In White society, individuals of African descent are regarded with disdain. African Americans constitute a marginalized group, experiencing deprivation of social, political, and economic rights and resources. They endure a life of profound misery, scarcely superior to that of stray dogs. They lack adequate facilities, and the educational system is also afflicted by racial attitudes. The sole alteration in the existence of Black Americans is their evolution from slaves to servants. They began their lives in America as slaves to White people and now they are servants to White people. White people cannot think of Blacks as anything other than servants and unfortunately, even Black people can't think of themselves as anything other than servants to White people. And colour consciousness is the reason behind this kind of thinking. Toni Morrison, the American novelist, portrays the inverted relationship between White and Black people and the humiliations and assaults faced by Black people most vividly in her renowned work *The Bluest Eye*. Indeed, *The Bluest Eye* is a crystalline picture of colour awareness. Toni Morrison portrays the world of Black people through the Breedlove family. The Breedlove family serves as an epitome that illustrates the lives of Black people in White society. The realms of Whites and Black people are distinct—in other words, they are like two different poles of the earth that can never be united. If anything exists between Whites and Blacks, it is the only discrimination. Black people are always regarded as outsiders by White people, and Morrison introduces the Breedlove family, a Black family as outsiders. The introduction provides glimpses into the deplorable conditions of Black people. The first instance of the pathetic conditions of Black people comes to light in the description of the Breedloves' house. It is hardly justified to call it a house; rather it is an abandoned apartment that was once a store. The history of this apartment reveals that the abandoned storefront was once the house of a gipsy family, then it was used as a Hungarian bakery, and later, it became a pizza parlour. Now it is the so-called house of the Breedloves.

“There is an abandoned store on the Southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-Fifth Street in Lorain Ohio... it foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy” (Morrison, 1999, p. 34).

The above lines indicate that the house of the Breedloves is like prickles among flowers. Its ugliness presents itself as a thing of disgust. It does not possess the quality to blend with the other houses around it. The abandonment of the storefront indicates the abandonment of the Breedloves, Black people. The dwelling of the Breedlove family shows the status of Black people in the White world. The sole existing relationship between White and Black people is that of master and slave, as they were taken to America as slaves. European ships transported commodities to Africa, where they were traded for enslaved individuals. Later, the vessels went to America to trade slaves for agricultural goods produced by slave labor, which were subsequently sold in Europe on their return. Although the world has changed a lot, the identity and the status of Black people remain the same as it has become a tradition that cannot be broken. The only thing that has changed is the alteration of the terminology; previously they were called slaves now they are called servants. Most Black people as presented in *The Bluest Eye* are servants of White people. This profession of servanthood is not their choice; rather, it is a legacy that must be inherited by Black people. Both Cholly Breedlove and Pauline Breedlove are direct or indirect servants of White people. After leaving school, Cholly

Breedlove begins to work in a feed and grain store as a servant. After his marriage to Pauline, he takes a job in a steel mill.

“They agreed to marry and go way up north, where Cholly said steel mills were begging for workers...Cholly found work in the steel mills right away” (Morrison, 1999, p. 90).

His indirect slavery, or his servanthood, as it was paid employment, absorbs all his energy and emotions and makes him a cranky and hollow man. Now he is only a drunk man whose only job is to take out his frustration on his wife, Pauline. It is his present identity that is a source of shame for himself. Cholly's failure makes Pauline the breadwinner of the family. She commences her employment as a housekeeper, essentially serving a White family. This is the best job that suits her and suits any Black person. “She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs” (Morrison, 1999, p. 98). The occupations of Cholly and Pauline Breedlove exemplify the limited domestic roles historically available to Black Americans, which were often reduced to forms of servitude.

The Fatal Claws of Beauty Standard

The existence of Black individuals within the realm of White individuals can be readily inferred. Currently, Black individuals comprise 13.6% of the total U.S. population, but in 1950, they represented about 10% of the total population. The population of Black individuals in America categorizes them as a minority group and reflects aspects of their challenging existence. What will happen if crows begin to live with peacocks? The beauty of peacocks will constantly try to exploit the consciousness of the crows and will compel them to feel themselves uglier and filthier than they actually are. The same thing happens to Black people in America. White people always consider Black people as outsiders and only as filthy creatures of God who only deserve abhorrence and avoidance. Both Black and White people believe that they are different and this difference begins with their different skin colour. Where white signifies beauty and purity, the colour black signifies ugliness and inhumanity. The belief of White people is so destructive that it goes so far as to destroy the existence of Black people. The race consciousness of White people makes Black people feel as though they are the creatures of a different world. The physical features of Black people do not match the concept of beauty defined by White community. According to the beauty theory of White people, only people with white skin, brown hair and blue eyes are beautiful. Thus, Black people who are black-skinned, black-haired and black-eyed are not considered beautiful. Even White people think that Black people are not worthy enough to be noticed. For example, one day, Pecola ventures to purchase some candy from a white-owned sundries store, and the behaviour and gestures she receives from Mr. Yacobowski, the head of the store, question her existence and deny her presence.

“He looks towards her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes drawback, hesitate, and hover. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see” (Morrison, 1999, p. 36).

The shopkeeper shows indifference upon seeing Pecola and he finds nothing in Pecola that makes her worthy of remark. He compares her to ‘nothing’. Within seconds Pecola loses her existence and turns into a nonexistent figure. The shopkeeper is the prototype of White people, and his behaviour and belief epitomize the behaviour and belief of White people. The avoidance by White people makes Black people feel intolerable shame. The insult that Pecola encounters here presents the life of Black people in the domain of White people, a life full of ignorance and insult. Here, the shop-keeper's ignorance ignites Pecola's low self-esteem, a feeling that makes a person believe that he/she does not deserve love, respect, or any rewards and this feeling kills a person along with all his/her potentialities. Not only do White people insult Black people because of their blackness but they also criticize their ways of living, walking, sleeping, talking. Even Black people who fall victim to the internalized racism begin

to insult their own people, fellow Black people. Pecola's schoolmates usually tease her with a verse like this:

“Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked.
Stch ta ta stch ta ta
stach ta ta ta ta ta” (Morrison, 1999, p. 50)

Here, the Black boys compose a verse criticizing the way Cholly, a Black man, usually sleeps. It seems that Black people are only mere objects of entertainment. This is a visible instance of self-hatred and mental deterioration resulting from internalized racism. Usually, White people entertain themselves by teasing and insulting Black people. In fact, to please their id—the unconscious part of mind that chases pleasure, to maintain their White supremacy, White people try to do anything to present Black people as increasingly inferior. Anything can be overlooked by White people but the blackness and ugliness of Black people cannot be ignored. Their blackness is the very thing that makes them an eyesore to White people. “And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (Morrison, 1999, p. 37).

An Unfair Atmosphere in Educational Sector

The colour awareness of White people makes the lives of Black people pathetic. Black people also face inequality in the field of education. Black people are only Black and what will they do with the light of education? It was believed that education was not for slaves as they are only meant to provide service. Before 1865 most of Black people were unable to read and write. Prior to the extensive admission of Black students into predominantly White universities in 1965-66, the academic community largely overlooked the presence of Black individuals (Ballard, 1973). In 1865 slavery was abolished in America but this did not mean that Black people received equal rights and facilities like White people. The “separate but equal” doctrine, which was established by the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, authorized state-mandated racial segregation in public services and educational institutions across the United States. However, ironically here ‘equality’ does not indicate equality; rather, it means inequality. Black children got the opportunity to be educated but the learning environment of the school was not conducive enough to encourage them to learn peacefully. Colour consciousness is ingrained in the blood of White people. White children are aware of the fact that they are White and superior, and that there is a difference between them and Black people, the inferiors. Colour awareness has also distorted the minds of innocent children. This consciousness prevents the development of friendships between Black and White children. White students consciously maintain both physical and mental distance from Black students and never miss a chance to mock or irritate Black students. The same dynamic is portrayed by Toni Morrison in her novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola, a Black girl, never makes a White friend. She only experiences humiliation from White students. It is a common belief that school is a place where unconditional friendship is easily formed but not a single White student shows any interest in making friendship with Pecola solely because of her Blackness. The students use Pecola's name as a term of abuse, wielding it to insult one another.

“When one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy..., she could say, Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot” (Morrison, 1999, p. 34).

Even White teachers who are considered the holders of knowledge are not free from the strokes of colour consciousness. They also perpetuate the distinction between White and Black students. They do not accord equal significance to Black and White students. They even try to avoid Black students. Pecola is also a victim of her teachers' ignorance. “They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond” (Morrison, 1999, p. 34). This is a real reflection of the American educational system, where Black students don't

receive equal importance and equal learning opportunities due to racial disparities. The U.S. educational system is among the most inequitable in the industrialized world, with children consistently experiencing significantly disparate learning opportunities contingent upon their social standing. (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Thus, the claim that Black students receive equal educational opportunities exists only in theory.

No Empathy, Only So-Called Sympathy towards the Black Victims

If a person's existence is denied, can he/she expect that his/her pain will be shared or felt by someone else? Certainly not, and the same thing happens to Pecola. The victims of colour consciousness lose the most important aspects of their lives—their unsophisticated childhood and dignity and, in exchange, they receive only so-called superficial sympathy, not genuine empathy. There is nobody who really feels their pain; there is nobody who defends them in a true sense; and there is nobody who declares a revolt against the injustice done to Pecola. Toni Morrison incisively critiques the mother-daughter relationship in *The Bluest Eye*. It is not that Pauline loved Pecola before the rape; rather, after that incident, their relationship was completely severed. Conventionally, mother is the first to defend her daughter if something tragic happens to her. She mourns any loss to her daughter. A mother can be compared to an umbrella which protects her child from the harshness of the sun and the downpour of rain. A mother is a person who never hesitates to do whatever it takes for the welfare of her child. No one can understand the pain of a girl better than her mother. It is a mother who believes her child blindly and unconditionally. But in the case of Pecola Breedlove, nothing of the sort occurs. Pauline, mother of Pecola, does not share the pain of her daughter. She is not empathetic toward Pecola; nor does she show enough sympathy towards Pecola. When Pecola opens her eyes after regaining consciousness, she finds her mother staring at her with a look of pain and hatred. "So, when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her" (Morrison, 1999, p. 129). Pecola does not find much pain or pity in the eyes of Pauline that might alleviate her pain slightly. Pauline does not take any action against Cholly, who is not worthy enough to be called a father. She does not protest the injustice done to her daughter; rather, she starts hating Pecola, a hatred she represses within herself. When a daughter needs her mother most, the mother distances herself. This is profoundly tragic. Neither her mother nor a single mature person of her own race shows any kind of empathy or sympathy towards her. Only Claudia and Frieda feel pity for Pecola:

"We were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her...And I believed our sorrow was more intense because nobody else seemed to share it" (Morrison, 1999, p. 149).

Everybody despises her, including her biological mother. Pauline indirectly places the blame on Pecola because, in her unconscious mind, she believes that Pecola is equally responsible for the unpleasant incident. Pauline does not show any concern for Pecola; rather, she actively avoids her presence. It seems that Pecola's presence frustrates her id, and she resorts to the help of 'avoidance'. Avoidance functions as a defense mechanism when a person tries to avoid the objects or individuals that hurt his/her pleasure principle. After Pecola's rape, Pauline simply avoids her. She does not even talk to her. They live in the same house but they treat each other like strangers. No bond remains between them. Pauline immerses herself in her job and deliberately ignores her. Her avoidance is made clear through the conversation between Pecola and her imaginary self.

"How do you know nobody talks to me? They don't. When you're in the house with me, even Mrs Breedlove doesn't say anything to you. Ever sometimes I wonder if she even sees you" (Morrison, 1999, p. 156).

Pauline does not want to face Pecola because Pecola's face will remind her of Cholly's heinous act, making her anxious and disturbed. Here, the reason of Pauline's avoidance is very

confusing. Is she avoiding Pecola because her presence will remind her of the unpleasant incident, her husband's transgression, or is she avoiding her because the presence of Pecola will remind her of the fact that her husband's love has been shared? She resorts to avoidance because she does not want to accept that she is not the only one who enchants her husband. This realization deeply displeases her. Consequently, in order to please her id, she allows her ego to employ avoidance. She does not allow her ego to recognize that Pecola, her daughter, is not her rival; rather, she is an innocent victim of her husband's repressed desire. Thus, Pecola, the victim of physical assault, does not receive genuine sympathy from her mother, let alone empathy. Pecola's trauma demands love, empathy, and support, yet she receives only avoidance and loneliness. Pauline should stand by her; she should be a source of support for Pecola; she should take action against Cholly, the guilty party in the assault on her daughter, but, tragically, she does nothing for Pecola. She remains silent and chooses the path of willful ignorance. When Pecola should be cared for by her mother, Pauline prioritizes her job over her daughter. "Mrs. Breedlove still does housework" (Morrison, 1999, p. 162). Emotion does not matter to her because she is well aware that emotion will frustrate her id.

5. Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is not only a literary narrative; it is a vivid and pragmatic reflection of a discriminatory society that directly breeds its own racism. The study exposes the harsh and traumatic experiences of the Breedlove family, detailing their ultimate fate that reveals the destructive impacts of colour consciousness. The main findings demonstrate that colour consciousness is not merely an external tool of exploitation; rather, it operates as an internalized psychological venom. It reveals the cruel reality of the Breedlove family's sufferings, encompassing restricted housing, limited economic mobility, disrupted educational environments, and the destruction of the fundamental mother-daughter bond. Their skin colour, and their inherent blackness, decide their fate and they silently accept their imposed lot without questioning the validity of the so-called White beauty standards. Colour consciousness has made the world of Black people narrower, a space in which they are only existing not truly living. White racial consciousness has created a wall of discrimination between the races, denoting the lives of both races, while internalized Black racial consciousness specifically leaves Black individuals feeling insignificant. The internalization of racism, colour consciousness and White beauty standards are the central issues examined, representing the main contribution of this study. The study demonstrates how Black characters are influenced by White beauty ideals, which unfortunately leads to their own psychological subjugation. The primary limitation of this study lies in its focus on a single text. Future studies could expand upon these findings by comparing Toni Morrison's works focusing on racism and the factors of internalized racism with those of other contemporary postcolonial authors. Finally, Toni Morrison's novel serves as a bleak warning that makes people recognize the devastating consequences caused by internalized racism when skin colour is allowed to define human worth.

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